

**NICE WHITE TEACHER:  
THE ROLE OF RACIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE AND  
TEACHER EDUCATION**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the School of Education, Department of Culture, Curriculum, and Change

Chapel Hill  
2008

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Nice White Teacher: The role of racial representations in popular culture and teacher education

(Under the direction of James Trier, George Noblit, Lynda Stone)

This paper outlines a project designed to investigate concepts of race, representation and pedagogy through the use of the school film *Freedom Writers*. During this project, my intention is to set up the concept of “representation” and race by having preservice teachers analyze selected readings by Stuart Hall (1980) and Henry Giroux (1997), view films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, and then review and analyze the users’ comments on Internet Movie Database. The analysis of the comments are completed using Hall’s (1980) theory of reading, which attributes three kinds of readings: “preferred,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” readings. My goal with this project is to engage preservice teachers in critical discussions of race and representation within the classroom. Ultimately, I hope to encourage preservice teachers to think critically about popular culture messages and representations and how these messages affect their role in the classroom.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Without a team of editors, contributors, and supporters, a thesis is nothing but words on a page. Thank you James Trier for the guidance and support. I am especially grateful for the patience and understanding of Will and Scarlett, without whom this would not have been possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Television and film provide information, entertainment, and possible escape from reality for viewers. According to Nash Information Services, LLC., (2008) in 2007 there were approximately 1.42 billion movie tickets sold in the United States. This amounts to \$9.6 billion in revenue for the film industry (“US Movie Market Summary 1995 to 2008”). These astounding numbers do not include the films shown in the home through on-demand store purchases and store rentals. Nielsen Media Research (2008) collects data based upon television viewing preferences of Americans; the company has been collecting data since 1953. Nielson estimates that in late August 2007, there were approximately 112.8 million television households in the United States (“TV Ratings”). The 2006 U.S. Census estimated the average household size at 2.6 persons. This means that at any given time, it is possible that there are approximately 293.28 million television viewers. These numbers suggest that the potential for media to influence a large number of viewers is apparent.

As a child growing up in a small northwest Georgia town, I relished my time sitting watching television. Visions of adventure and promises of experiences outside my small-town life kept me fascinated by television and movies. I soon learned rules for behavior and to prepare for college from my television family on *The Cosby Show*. *Growing Pains* convinced me it was unwise to run away with a boyfriend and that cheaters always get

caught. And Alex P. Keaton, of *Family Ties*, convinced me I did not want to become a Republican. Some of my favorite movies had me writing romance novels in Colombia, searching for ancient artifacts, and wondering why Rhett didn't give a damn.

I intend this number crunching and reminiscing to be suggestive of the great importance and influence of media, culture, and society within my experiences in the United States. I derived a certain amount of class-consciousness from the representations available to me.

As a society bombarded by media representations and influenced by those representations, we must consider the messages, both obvious and situated, within the context of popular culture. This task falls into the arena of cultural studies. Raymond Williams' (1961) discusses the premise of culture and its effect on society in *The Long Revolution*. His description of culture and the importance of the analysis of culture provide a larger context for this paper:

Culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture. [...] Such analysis will include[...]historical criticism[...]in which intellectual and imaginative works are analyzed in relation to particular traditions and societies, but will also include analysis of elements in the way of life that to followers of other definitions are not 'culture' at all: the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which member of the society communicate. (p. 57)

Within this description of culture and the possibilities for analysis, the examination of the influence of media can occur. Film and television can motivate us to fight for a cause, find laughter in the mundane, and loathe various villains. While enjoying these representations and suspending the disbelief necessary for full immersion into a popular culture text, such as

film, we must also be critical of the messages circulated by these entertainment forms. The audience is trained through repetitive visual cues and images that certain elements are *bad* and some *good*. Westerns most famously made the dichotomy apparent on screen, depicting the hero in white clothing and the villain dressed in black. Likewise, I have learned from films that the United States was in conflict with the Germans in the 40s, Koreans in 50s and 60s, the Vietnamese in the 60s and 70s, and the Soviets in the 80s and 90s. I know from *Red Dawn* that the Cubans and Soviets are our enemies, which led me, in my youth, to be suspicious of anyone with a Russian accent.

A critical engagement of film should follow a viewing. The depictions portrayed should be analyzed and the viewer should critique elements such as race and stereotyping along with plot and character development. I believe this type of close reading of film and television allows for a broader understanding of society, culture, and hidden meanings.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCHOOL FILM

Before I entered my first classroom I held preconceived notions of what my role as a teacher would entail. Films such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Teachers* (1984), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) gave me insight into education. These films are called “school films” by James Trier (2001). Trier (2007) defines a school film as “film that is in some way – even incidentally – about an educator or a student” (p.135). Over the course of several projects, Trier (2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004, 2005) has collected various films including recent works such as *School of Rock* and *Elephant*, obscure films such as *Zebrahead* and *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, and more well-known pictures such as *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and *Dangerous Minds*. Even more recent school films include *Half Nelson* and *Freedom Writers*, which is the center of this



project. Trier (2007) uses these films as pedagogical texts within the teacher education classroom “to introduce concepts that are new to students, to challenge students to reconsider certain assumption they hold, and to engage students in analyzing important issues related to the profession of teaching” (pp. 135-136). Trier (2007) notes, “the popular culture form that I used most extensively has been film, a practice also engaged in by others in higher education (e.g., Brunner, 1994; Freedman, 1999; Giroux, 1993; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Paul, 2001; Robertson, 1995)” (p. 135). These scholars, like Trier (2007), analyze popular culture and the influence these texts have in the classroom. Henry Giroux’s (2002) book *Breaking into the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*, discusses the role of film as a pedagogical tool. In this text, Giroux (2002) analyzes the films *Dangerous Minds* and *Dead Poets Society*. Ellsmore & Ellismore (2005) published *Carry On Teachers! Representations of the Teaching Profession in Screen Culture*, which investigates the role of film on the culture, history, and representations of education in Britain.

Tillman & Trier (2007) in their study of the use of the television show *Boston Public* as a pedagogical tool, detail a wealth of resources on the research of education and media that is worth noting:

A robust academic literature base exists that explores in detail how educators and students have been represented in films and television programs. Books on the subject include David Considine’s (1985) *The Cinema of Adolescence*; Mary Dalton’s (2004) *The Hollywood Curriculum*; Farber, Provenzo, and Holm’s (1994) *Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture*; Timothy Shary’s (2002) *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary Cinema*; and Robert Bulman’s (2005) *Hollywood Goes to High School*. There are also many articles and book chapters that have appeared on the subject (e.g., Ayers, 1994; Bauer, 1998; Freedman, 1999; Giroux, 1993, 2002; Jagodzinski, 2003; Joyrich, 1995; Keroes, 1999; Long, 1996; Reed, 1989; Robertson, 1995; Schwartz, 1960; Smith, 1999; Trier, 2003c). (p. 122)

## CHAPTER 2

### A PRESERVICE TEACHER PROJECT

Henry Giroux (2003) conceptualizes popular culture texts as “public pedagogies,” meaning that they:

work pedagogically to legitimate some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others. Acknowledging the educational role of such films requires that educators and others find ways to make the political more pedagogical. One approach would be to develop a pedagogy of disruption that would attempt to make students and others more attentive to visual and popular culture as an important site of political and pedagogical struggle. Such a pedagogy would raise questions regarding how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of the real than others or how certain meanings take on the force of commonsense assumptions and go relatively unchallenged in shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations. (pp.78-79)

These popular culture texts described by Giroux include films and television shows. What Giroux suggests in the above reference is that films and television shows are used as a means of learning about society and culture. Following this line of reasoning, films representing classrooms, teachers, and students, allow for a means of learning about the culture of schooling. One such film, *Dangerous Minds*, has been the focus of multiple pieces by Giroux including *Public Spaces, Private Lives* (2003), *Breaking into the Movies* (2002), *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (1997), and others.

As a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I do not yet have a group of preservice teachers under my tutelage. However, I have designed this project with the intention of one day putting these steps into practice. During this project, my

intention is to set up the concept of “representation” and race by having preservice teachers analyze selected readings by Stuart Hall (1980) and Henry Giroux (1997), view films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, and then review and analyze the users’ comments on Internet Movie Database. The analysis of the comments should be completed using Hall’s (1980) theory of reading, which attributes three kinds of readings: “preferred,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” readings. My goal with this project is to engage preservice teachers in critical discussions of representation and race within the classroom. Ultimately, I hope to encourage preservice teachers to think critically about the popular culture messages and representations and how these messages affect their role in the classroom. Necessary on the part of the preservice teacher is the ability to write critically reflective essays about what they are experiencing and understanding and the ability to engage in public discourse within the teacher education classroom concerning representations and readings.

After establishing the guidelines and working with the preservice teachers for around six weeks, I plan to introduce this project. Ideally, during this time in the semester the preservice teachers are comfortable in the routine of the teacher education classroom and have begun active and critical discourse with their classmates. The activities required of the project are as follows:

1. Students read the Stuart Hall (1980) selection “Encoding/decoding.”
2. Students write reflective essays in response to the article and discuss Hall’s view of representation in class. As a class, we discuss various media.
3. Students view the film *Freedom Writers* (2007).
4. Students write essays on the film, attempting to use Hall’s notions of “preferred,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” readings. In the writing, they will reflect on their

- understanding of Hall's work and analyze the user comment section for *Freedom Writers* on Internet Movie Database. The students categorize the user comments based on the "preferred," "negotiated," and "oppositional" readings of the film.
5. Students read Giroux's (1997) work analyzing *Dangerous Minds* (1995). The students will view *Dangerous Minds* if they are not familiar with the film.
  6. Students write a reflective essay articulating Hall's notions of representation with Giroux's discussion of "whiteness" in *Dangerous Minds* within the context of *Freedom Writers*.<sup>1</sup> This step is followed by a classroom discussion.
  7. Finally, students synthesize the discussions and films with their experiences within the public school classroom.

## STUART HALL'S NOTION OF REPRESENTATION

Stuart Hall believes that culture and representation are an inherent part of our understanding of the world and cultural studies looks to decode these interpretations. Hall (1997) notes "cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in one way or another to the centrality of representations and of the practice of representation" (p. 5). Representation is central to the understanding of how we view the world.

The traditional view of representation is two-fold. In this view representation is concerned with the notion that something exists and now we are *representing* it, depicting it. This view includes the depiction of people, places, and events. Examples include a movie depicting an urban classroom or a print advertisement portraying a housewife cooking

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<sup>1</sup>Race and "whiteness" are not the only issues worthy of analysis in the film. My plan is to continue working with the representations of the film and including that of gender.

dinner. Secondly, this traditional notion suggests that some thing, which represents a thing, “stands in” for it. An example of this would be the role of a republic where there are designated individuals that represent a group of people. This traditional notion of representation, described by Hall (1997), is “the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which stands in for something else, both of these ideas are brought together in the notion of representation” (p. 6).

Hall suggests that this idea of representation is “too literal” and that the representation is “giving meaning” to the thing being presented. He discusses the need to consider “whether these things do have any one essential, fixed or true meaning against which we could measure, as it were, the level of distortion in the way in which they’re represented” (p. 7). According to the current cultural studies view of representation, there can never be one interpretation of an event. The interpretations taken from a representation are dependant upon the cultural, social, and intellectual knowledge of the viewer. There is no one true meaning. Hall furthers his discussion by stating that representation does not capture an event and depict that event because there was no “true” defined event to begin with. Hall tells us that the act of representation becomes part of the event and the meaning of said event will depend on what people interpret, which depends upon the way the representation is presented. Representation becomes a necessary part of the event (pp. 8-16).

Hall (1980) examines the world of mass media and the conveying of dominance from producers to consumers of texts in his article “Encoding/decoding.” These texts include television and film. He uses broadcast news agencies as an example for the contextual analysis of decoding and readings. The producers develop stories intended to relate certain messages to the viewing audiences. Using political jargon or analysis has the potentiality of

missing the targeted audience based on the viewers' level of understanding and interpretation. The viewers who find difficulty in following the analysis or message sent through the communication line do not "read" the messages as intended by the producers. Hall writes that the "viewers are not operating within the 'dominant' or 'preferred' code" (p.135). In this instance, the viewers' reading is constructed of what Hall calls "symbolic vehicles" decoded to fit the current perception of understanding and reality (p.128).

Hall offers three variations for the reading of the intended message that include "preferred," "negotiated," and "oppositional." The position of "preferred" reading requires the viewer to fully accept the concepts and codes of the text. The dominant views of this reading are so prevalent that they seem natural to the viewer. This constitutes the "hegemonic viewpoint" that Hall describes:

The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order. (p.137)

This is the position that is clear to the viewer based on the dominant views of the society. The acceptance of the "preferred" reading is key in understanding the power of dominant representations in films. This includes the representation of teachers in film.

The second reading is a "negotiated" one in which the reader accepts the intended meaning while negotiating it with the context of the reader. In this instance, the reader accepts the grand narrative presented as true, but makes exceptions for the contradictions. The reader accepts certain aspects of the text while disagreeing with others. The final type of reading, "oppositional," is considered counter-hegemonic. While understanding the

“preferred” reading, the viewer rejects the dominant meanings and representations presented by the text. The reader finds disagreement with all of the text (p.136).

In his 2000 paper, “Using Popular ‘School Films’ to Engage Student Teachers in Critical Reflection,” Trier discusses the use of Hall’s theory for deriving meaning in a text when using popular teacher films with student teachers. His (2000) project requires that student teachers view the film *To Sir, With Love* and critique the film based on Hall’s theory of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The film follows the events of teacher Mark Thackery (Sir), played by Sir Sidney Poitier, as he attempts to teach a group of teenagers from London’s East End, a primarily working class neighborhood. “Sir” resorts to unconventional teaching methods, by 1960s standards, and ultimately reaches his students. Trier describes how his students’ successfully used Hall’s theory in their discussion of the film:

Some students love the film and ‘read’ it in what Stuart Hall (1980) has called a ‘preferred’ way. These are readings in which the students uncritically accept the viewing positions that the film works to make most inviting, such readings are filled with praise for how Sir cares for his students, for his willingness to try new ways to reach the students, for how he makes the curriculum ‘relevant,’ and so on. Other students perform more ‘negotiated’ readings in which they respond favorably to some parts but not to others, as when ‘Sir’ berates the girls in one scene, calling them ‘sluts,’ or as how the film seems to be saying that a good teacher must be ‘an outsider’ without any training who succeeds where other (trained) teachers have been failing. Occasionally, there are what Hall has called ‘oppositional’ readings. These are readings that refuse any of the ‘preferred’ viewing positions that the film offers, that do not engage in any negotiations, and that instead read the entire film in a ‘contrary’ way, as when a student teacher views the film as ‘taming’ the issue of race, as constructing gender in problematic ways, and as teaching (like ‘Sir’s’) will have any dramatic effect on the post-graduation lives of the students in the film. (p. 23)

My goal in including this brief description of Trier’s project with student teachers, Stuart Hall, and popular teacher films is two-fold. I think that Trier’s work with the student

teachers and their understanding of Stuart Hall helps to define Hall's notions of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings of popular culture media texts. Also, I want to establish the groundwork for the project that I am proposing.

### A BRIEF SUMMARY OF *FREEDOM WRITERS*

*Freedom Writers* is set in the 1990s and tells the story of a novice teacher's interactions with a group of students in a Long Beach high school two years following the Los Angeles Riots. The film is based on the book *The Freedom Writers Diaries: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*, a collection of essays compiled from the real experiences of Erin Gruwell (1999) and her students, known as the Freedom Writers. The teacher in the film, Erin Gruwell, played by Academy Award winning actress Hilary Swank, begins her teaching career at Wilson High School teaching a remedial freshman English class. Early in the film, Erin has difficulty establishing a connection with her students and turns to her father and husband for support. Erin's father, a former civil rights attorney played by Scott Glenn, offers guidance, but not the support Erin seeks.

Scott, Erin's husband played by Patrick Dempsey, distances himself from Erin's work and eventually their relationship. Erin dedicates herself to teaching her students, leaving little time for her husband. She takes on part-time jobs to buy books for the students and spends late nights working in the classroom. This eventually leads to the distancing between Erin and Scott. Erin only realizes the effect of her dedication to her work when Scott asks for a divorce. The faculty of Wilson High contributes little to helping Erin in the classroom. They



offer advice based on institutional standards and past performance of the students, some staff suggesting that the students simply “don’t want to learn.”

At the center of the film, lie the stories of the students. The students are skeptical of Erin and her interest in their lives. Initially, they resist her attempts and refuse to cross the self-inflicted boundaries they have designated in the classroom. Based on race, the students sit within self-segregated groups of Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans. Erin attempts to break up the division by assigning students seats outside of their preferred area. In an attempt to connect the culture of the students with curriculum, Erin uses a Tupac Shakur song for a lesson on analyzing poetry. The students do not accept Erin’s use of the song.

At one point, a riot breaks out on the lawn of school. Erin walks through the mix of students watching the violence. She sees some of her students fighting and one of her students carrying a gun, but Erin does nothing and returns to the school the next day. During a lesson, Erin intercepts a paper that some of her students have circulated in the classroom. The paper contains a crude drawing of Jamal, an African-American student. Depicted with exaggerated features, the drawing inspires Erin to connect the events with those of the Nazis. She then begins to teach her students about the Holocaust and has them read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Also, she takes the students on a trip to the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance and arranges a dinner at which the students meet with Holocaust survivors. Eva, a Latina student, confronts Erin about the story of Anne Frank. After reading the novel, Eva is upset to learn that Anne dies. Early in the film, Eva is shown fighting with gangs and throughout the film she is placed in difficult situations. This insight into Eva’s personal life is a technique repeated with other students in Erin’s class.

The film depicts the personal struggles of some of the students, which is key to the assignment Erin develops. Erin, realizing the importance of the student's lives outside of school, assigns personal journals to her class. The students are instructed to write daily in the journal. Erin tells the students that she will not read the entries unless the students have given her permission and that they are allowed to write about whatever they choose. The journals are kept in a locked cabinet in the classroom. Through these personal reflections, Erin learns of the society within which the students live. These journals serve as the foundation for the book published by Erin Gruwell, *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

#### INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE

In the required activities of the preservice teacher project I outlined in a previous section, students are required to view and interpret the user comments listed on Internet Movie Database (hereafter commonly referred to as IMDb) using Hall's (1980) notion of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings and scenes from the film *Freedom Writers*. As a key component to the project, I briefly describe IMDb and share some of the user comments listed on the website in order to demonstrate the usefulness of the database and give examples of the three types of readings. Found at [www.IMDb.com](http://www.IMDb.com), IMDb is a website listing the details to over 15 million film and television titles and 2.3 million persons associated with the film and television industry. The data collection began in 1990 and progressed from a list of 23,000 titles to the large information warehouse it is today. There are numerous categories of information for each movie, person, and television show listed. Some of these categories for film include the following: production details, cast and crew,

plot summary, trivia, external reviews, and user comments. For the purpose of my proposed project with preservice teachers, the user comment section is my focus.

The project I have outlined requires the students, after viewing the film *Freedom Writers*, to search through the users' comments listed on IMDb for the film. Presently, there are 163 user comments posted for the film. Each comment contains a date for the posting and a ranking of how many users found the comment helpful. The comments posted range in length and in depth of analysis of the film.

My intention with the *Freedom Writers* project is to encourage the preservice teachers to use critical and reflective thinking when viewing films about education. After viewing the film *Freedom Writers* and reading Hall's (1980) notions of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings, I will require the preservice teachers to examine the user comments on IMDb and discuss the comments using Hall's terms. This will allow the students to engage in scholarly discourse while reflecting on their own preconceived notions of schooling. For the purpose of further explaining the preservice teacher project, I will examine a few of the posted comments ("What is Internet Movie Database?" 2008).

An author with the username Tollini, from the United States, made the first selected comment. Tollini posted the comment "Truly Moving Picture" on December 15, 2006, and as of this time 122 out of 145 people have found the comment useful. This user comment discusses details of the film and the users personal sentiment concerning the details:

I saw this film on December 13th, 2006 in Indianapolis. I am one of the judges for the Heartland Film Festival's Truly Moving Picture Award. A Truly Moving Picture "...explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life." Heartland gave that award to this film.

Woodrow Wilson High School is located in Long Beach, California. The school is voluntarily integrated, and it isn't working. The Asians, the Blacks,

the Latinos, and a very few whites not only don't get along, but also stay with their own and are part of protective and violent gangs. There isn't much teaching or learning going on at the school. It is a warehouse for young teenagers until they can drop out or are kicked out.

With this background, an idealistic teacher (Hilary Swank) arrives to teach Freshmen English. She is very educated, pretty, middle class, non-ethnic, well-dressed, and smart. From day one, she doesn't fit in the classroom with these tough kids, and she doesn't fit in with the faculty, who have all but given up and resigned themselves to being the keepers of the student warehouse.

But our idealistic teacher will not give up. She slowly and painfully tries to teach by first learning about "...the pain..." the students feel. She encourages each of her students to keep a journal of their painful and difficult life, and then to share the journal with her. She also attempts to get the four ethnic groups to come together by getting them to recognize what they have in common; specifically, their music, their movies, their broken families, and their broken community surroundings.

While struggling with the students, she has to deal at the same time with two complicated and demanding male relationships. Her husband (Patrick Dempsey) is often supportive, but often jealous of her time commitments. Her father (Scott Glenn) is often disappointed of her career choice, but often proud of her courage and tenacity.

This story feels real. It is beautifully done. The acting of Swank, Dempsey and Glenn is professional and believable. More importantly the story highlights our society's challenges in schooling the children of poor and one-parent families.

The movie doesn't give miracle answers. But it does give hope. And in the end, sincere effort appears to count for something ... maybe everything. ("IMDb user comment," 2008)

My hope is that the comment listed above would be discussed as a preferred reading of the film. Tollini, the author, discusses the film using language that the filmmakers would see as showing support for the film. The school is discussed as a "warehouse for young teenagers" and the faculty as having "all but given up and resigned themselves to being keepers of the student warehouse." In addition, Tollini also comments that Erin Gruwell "will not give up" and that "she encourages each of her students to keep a journal of their painful and difficult

life, and then to share the journal with her.” These selected passages from the user’s comment suggest the author had a preferred reading of the film, meaning that the author agreed and accepted the message without question. In the course of the assignment, a student choosing this user comment and describing it as a preferred reading would demonstrate an understanding of Hall’s (1980) notion and the representations of the film (“IMDb user comment,” 2008).

In a comment titled “C+, Needs Improvement,” the author Mary(NoLittleLamb) (2008) from the United States, writes a review of the film noting negative aspects that were not present in the review by Tollini. Four out of 5 people found the comment useful:

The true story of a young teacher, Erin Gruwell played by Hillary Swank, in an inner city school who learns to be a better teacher by inspiring her students to be courageous, happy, and to see the error in their violent ways by teaching them to express themselves through writing. A touching and socially important message that has unfortunately been told millions of times before and was unable to bring anything new to the audience watching it. We are only truly touched by this story when we are reminded that it is based on actual events, otherwise it seems like old news that has been pumped out over and over again by Hollywood.

Hillary Swanks performance could only be described as "meh". Apparently she is only truly talented when it comes to playing boys or socially awkward people. Her performance reminded me a lot of my teachers in high school: ambitious and important but overall pretty boring and dull.

The back-stories and the performances of the students I found to be quite interesting. April Hernandez was beautiful as Eva and I really believed the transformation that her character went through. There were some parts of the plot that bothered me though, I found the situation with her husband predictable in a bad way and I felt like it was an aspect of the story that was not totally seen through by the film-making team. They put it in for the sake of putting it in and it did not get the respect it deserved. They should have left it out completely or better developed the idea and the emotions surrounding it.

It was overall a decent story, but I wasn't thrilled or moved to tears. The acting was good but the characters were way too typical, each one was very classic and had been done before thousands of times. It would definitely be good for children (maybe middle school aged) to watch and it wasn't a total waste of

my time so if you feel like being entertained for a little with a good ol' fashion "inner city kids get their lives turned around" movie, then this one should get added to your list of ones to watch. ("IMDb user comment," 2008)

This user's comment, posted by Mary, is an example of a negotiated reading. Mary writes, "The back-stories and the performances of the students I found to be quite interesting," a comment that shows that she accepts some of the messages portrayed by the film. In addition, Mary also points out positive aspects of the students' stories. For example, Mary writes that "April Hernandez [the actress portraying Eva] was beautiful as Eva and I really believed the transformation that her character went through." Overall Mary comments that she feels the movie "would definitely be good for children (maybe middle school aged) to watch." These comments all show that Mary found some appealing aspects in the film; however, she later writes that "the characters were way too typical," suggesting that she did not accept some aspects of the film. Also, Mary finds faults with the filmmakers portrayal of Erin's marriage. Mary writes that she "found the situation with her [Erin's] husband predictable in a bad way and I felt like it was an aspect of the story that was not totally seen through by the film-making team."

The analysis of this user comment shows that Mary had both a positive and negative reaction to the film. This user comment can be read as a negotiated reading, where the author both accepts and rejects some of the film. The preservice teachers completing this project should be able to analyze comments like these by Mary and discuss them with concerns to Hall's notions of representation ("IMDb user comment," 2008).

Posting on January 22, 2007, Sovzapata from Mexico, writes a scathing review of the film. The author shows what it means to completely reject the representations in the film

without exception. Fifteen out of 22 people found the comment titled “White-washing of Minority Existence in US” useful:

I cannot believe that movies like this are still being made. Shame on all the bloody bastards who wasted money to make this awful propaganda film.

The premise is extremely offensive, and any attempt to make the movie original make it even more distasteful. White teacher turns wayward minority kids, who obviously cant do anything in their communities, and it is her "White Man's Burden", to civilize these woeful street urchins. But of course, I mean, what if they actually have to become respectable people without the aid of the cliché "trying to make a change" teacher.

It completely spits into the face of real-life urban life, and the fact that crime, vandalism, all these things are a part, but not dominant forces in urban life. It IS Possible for someone who is a minority, and grew up in a urban area to NOT need the help of the "oh-so successful bourgeois". This film is a disgrace, an utter disgrace and affront to working class poor, and the general oppressed urban minority in the United States.

This is the incarnation of the guilt of the Whites for having marginalized these groups of people, and classifying them, forever in time immemorial, as urban street thugs who care about nothing more than vices. Please for the love of all thats good, do not be fooled by the "movie by numbers", "urban kids are inferior, and oh so retarded without the help of the bourgeois", and laughable attempt at creating a change.

This is one of a long list of failures in the formulaic, and I think intentional destruction of the last shred of dignity the working class in America has. Shame on you Hollywood, for bowing to creating propaganda. (“IMDb user comment,” 2008)

This user posted a comment concentrated on a negative reaction to the film. Sovzapata writes, “The premise is extremely offensive, and any attempt to make the movie original make it even more distasteful.” The author describes the students in the film as “woeful street urchins” and lamblasts the “oh-so successful bourgeois.” The author never deviates from this negative review describing the film as “a disgrace.” Discussing the entire genre of school films, Sovzapata writes that *Freedom Writers* “is one of a long list of failures in the formulaic, and I think intentional destruction of the last shred of dignity the working class in

America has.” This user’s comment is an example of an oppositional reading of the film. For the purpose of the preservice teacher project I have outlined, I expect this type of comment to be analyzed by the students and discussed using Hall’s notions of representation.

The type of analysis I have outlined in this section makes the website IMDb useful for scholarly work furthering the inclusion of technology and varied media sources as pedagogical teaching tools (“IMDb user comment,” 2008). These user comments allow the reader to separate their personal reaction of the film. This detachment makes it possible to analyze the film using Stuart Hall’s notions of representation without being caught up in personal opinion. After reviewing the user comments and noting the three possible readings of the film, I plan to further the preservice teacher project by asking the students to review Henry Giroux’s analysis of the film *Dangerous Minds*.



### CHAPTER 3

#### EXAMINING HENRY GIROUX'S ANALYSIS OF *DANGEROUS MINDS*

*Dangerous Minds* is set in the 1990s and tells the story of retired U.S. Marine LouAnne Johnson and her struggles during her first year teaching at Parkmont High School, an inner-city school in East Palo Alto, California. The film is loosely based on the book *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, an autobiographical novel written by LouAnne Johnson (1992). LouAnne Johnson, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, arrives at Parkmont High with the intention of getting a student teaching position, but instead, is assigned to an English class populated with what she calls "rejects from hell." The students show disinterest in school and repeatedly test LouAnne's authority. In an attempt to grab the students' attention, LouAnne changes her dress and demeanor to produce a tougher appearance. Clad in a leather jacket and jeans, she begins reaching out to the students using unconventional teaching methods such as swearing in class and bribing the students with candy. These unconventional methods are hinted at in the movie poster for the film, "she broke the rules...and changed their lives."

Using the culture of drugs and music, LouAnne brings in the Bob Dylan song "Mr. Tambourine Man" and suggests to the students that the song centers on drug dealing. The lyrics of the song serve as a springboard into a lesson on poetry and symbolism. The students show interest in her lesson and she capitalizes on her success by next teaching the poetry of Dylan Thomas. The film depicts LouAnne as a dedicated teacher lacking a

personal life. She lives alone and has little support in and out of the classroom, except for her fellow teacher Hall Griffiths. This leaves time for LouAnne to connect on a personal level with her students. She becomes more than a teacher to a chosen few, Callie, Raul, and Emilio. Callie discovers she is pregnant during the film and turns to LouAnne for guidance, while Raul has a violent temper that must be controlled and Emilio needs encouragement to use his intelligence. LouAnne reaches out to her students and finds a place for herself within the school. Planning to leave after the year is over LouAnne is convinced by her students' dedication that she should stay at the school.

Picking up with popular culture texts and “public pedagogy,” Giroux (1997) argues in his book *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* that

The film [*Dangerous Minds*] attempts to represent ‘whiteness’ as the archetype of rationality, ‘tough’ authority, and cultural standards in the midst of the changing racial demographics of urban space and the emergence of a resurgent racism in the highly charged politics of the 1990s. (p.112)

Giroux's (1997) discussion of *Dangerous Minds* centers on the issue of “whiteness” in regards to educational settings. According to Amy Bergerson (2003), “‘Whiteness’ [...] is the ability to not be aware of one's own race” (p. 53). Giroux (1997) attests that LouAnne's authority, as a teacher controlling a group of chaotic minorities, is the “whiteness” in the film. Also, he suggests that the audience is urged to agree with LouAnne's order and authority (p. 115). As Giroux (2002) has noted, the students are “decontextualized and dehistoricized, the cultural identities of these students appear marginal to the construction of race as an ongoing principle of the film” (p. 150).

Giroux (1997) discusses elements of *Dangerous Minds* that support his notion of “whiteness” as a pedagogical practice in the film. Issues of privilege, authority, and race come up often in his discussion of this popular culture text. LouAnne's detachment from the

context of the students' lives adds to Giroux's arguments in such scenes as where she chooses the Dylan song "Mr. Tambourine Man" as a teaching text. LouAnne chooses a song that comes from a decade and culture foreign to her students. The only connection she makes between the song and her students is the possibility that the song is about drug dealing.

This notion that LouAnne is distanced from the reality of her students is reinforced with Giroux's discussion of her lesson using the work of Bob Dylan. Giroux describes her lesson as "nothing less than an act of cultural ignorance and bad pedagogy" (p. 153). LouAnne denies the culture of her students and uses her own cultural artifact to teach a lesson. She falsely connects the music to her students' culture using the stereotype of violence and drugs. Giroux condemns her approach to the lesson noting, "rather than excavating the traditions, themes, and experiences that make up her students' lives in order to construct her curriculum, she simply avoids their voices altogether in shaping the context of what she teaches" (p. 153). I believe this particular lesson provides space for preservice teachers to analyze and correct something I suggest in with my analysis of a similar scene in *Freedom Writers*.

In a teacher education setting, I believe that a close reading of popular culture texts can benefit preservice teachers with their understanding of race and schooling. Like Giroux's (1997) discussion of *Dangerous Minds*, preservice teachers can analyze scenes to find deeper meanings, more relevant to teaching, in the text. For example, Giroux analyzes a scene and uses his analysis to further belief that "whiteness" is central to *Dangerous Minds*:

LOUANNE: Was it worth it? You like to hit people? Why? You feel angry?

EMILIO: You're trying to figure me out. You going to try to psychologize me. I'll help you. I come from a broken home and we're poor, okay. I see the same fucking movies you do.

LOUANNE: I'd like to help you, Emilio.

EMILIO: Thank you very much. And how you going to do that? You going to give me some good advice – just say no – you going to get me off the streets? Well forget it. How the fuck are you going to save me from my life?

About this exchange, Giroux explains:

Emilio is trying to educate her, but LouAnne is not listening carefully. She assumes a moralizing posture that is totally indifferent to understanding the complex forces shaping Emilio's life. Nor can this great white hope consider the idea that her students' histories and world views might be incorporated usefully into her pedagogy in order to teach kids like Emilio the survival skills and knowledge they need to cope with the conditions and contexts of their surroundings. (pp. 120-121)

Giroux's (1997) discussion of specific instances within the context of "whiteness" is the same format that I suggest should be used with concepts of racial representations in the film *Freedom Writers*. Giroux (1997) insists that *Dangerous Minds* and similar films "can be used educationally to critically deconstruct both racial othering and "whiteness" as part of a broader discourse on racial justice" (pp.125-126).

Giroux (1993a) argues that the popularity of *Dangerous Minds* and the representations present in the film are the reason the film should be analyzed as a cultural text. The film reaches a broad span of audiences and can be used a pedagogical tool within teacher education programs as an example of urban schooling. The film in itself becomes a courier of identity and making meanings in a type of "pedagogy of representation":

In other words, a pedagogy of representation focuses on demystifying the act and process of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power that narrate identities through history, social forms, and modes of ethical address that appear objective, universally valid and consensual. (Giroux, 1993, p. 115)

According to Giroux in a later analysis, *Dangerous Minds* “is an important film to analyze pedagogically in order to address how the media is creating a representational racial politics that turns a generation of youth of color into a generation of suspects” (2002, p. 147).

In his analysis of *Dangerous Minds* in the chapter “The Politics of Pedagogy, Gender, and Whiteness in *Dangerous Minds*,” from *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*, Giroux (2002) begins his discussion of the film as a pedagogical text by examining the popularity of the film and its worthiness as a topic of analysis. Giroux contends, “While some may argue that *Dangerous Minds* is too popular and too unoriginal to be taken seriously as a cultural text, it is precisely because of its popularity and widespread appeal that it warrants an extended analysis” (p. 147). He continues his argument of the importance of the film by discussing the seeming innocence of the film and noting that the film is “offensive in terms of its racial politics but also its fundamentally debased depiction of teaching and education” (p. 147). *Dangerous Minds*, according to Giroux, presents multiple facets of schooling and promotes a specific message to the audience:

Providing an allegory for representing both the purpose of schooling and the politics of racial difference as they intersect within the contested space of the urban public schools, *Dangerous Minds* skillfully mobilizes race as an organizing principle to promote its narrative structure and ideological message. (p. 148)

Giroux describes this allegory as a “dual chronicle” depicting both “‘whiteness’ as the archetype of rationality” and “a mix of compassion and consumerism as a pedagogical solution to motivating teenagers” (p. 148). Both of these elements show the ulterior political messages in the film.

*Dangerous Minds* opens with scenes of children leaving their homes in the inner city and heading off to school. Giroux points out that “this is one of the few shots in the film that

provides a context for the children's lives" (p. 148). Situating the home life of the students early on, the film shows us one view of the inner city, one that Giroux describes as "a site of pathology, moral decay, and delinquency synonymous with the culture of working-class black life" (pp. 148-149). The choice to open the film with these images prepares the audience with background knowledge of the students, necessary to situate the culture of violence, poverty, and race within the film and the classroom. According to Giroux, "these opening scenes work powerfully in associating black and Hispanic kids with the culture of criminality and danger" (p. 150). Giroux (2002) contends throughout his analysis of *Dangerous Minds* that the choices of shots and details in the film perpetuate the dichotomy of black and white and all the cultural stereotypes that are associated with each. He states, "the structuring principles at work in *Dangerous Minds* perform a distinct function in their attempt to cater to white consumers of popular culture" (p. 150).

LouAnne Johnson, the teacher at the center of *Dangerous Minds*, is introduced by Giroux as "a good-hearted ingénue thrust into the classroom of 'at-risk' kids like a lamb led to the slaughter" (p. 149). She is dressed in what Giroux calls "dowdy tweeds and white lace" and is identified by one of the students as "white bread" (p. 149). Giroux argues that the film depicts LouAnne as the incarnation of "whiteness" and as a "norm for authority, orderliness, rationality, and control" (p. 150). While the black and Hispanic students in the film are, according to Giroux, represented as "intellectually inferior, hostile, and childish" (p. 150).

Giroux makes it clear in his description of *Dangerous Minds* that there is no attempt in the film to show the personal lives of the students. The sole focus is on the struggles of LouAnne. The students are void of culture and context and, according to Giroux, "if any

notion of identity occupies center stage, it is not that of the kids but that of a white woman trying to figure out how to live in a public space inhabited by racialized others” (p. 151). Not only does the film neglect the culture of the students, Giroux notes, “LouAnne has no understanding of the social and historical limits that shape their [the students] sense of agency on a daily basis” (p. 152). The lack of insight into the culture of the students is an aspect I would bring up in discussion during the classroom sessions of the preservice teacher project. This is something the preservice teachers should be noting during their analysis of the film *Freedom Writers*. Other aspects I will demonstrate during my analysis of the film later in this paper. The importance of having this cultural understanding of students is confirmed by Giroux in his observation that “by suggesting that white educators can ignore how larger social considerations impact on racial groups, white privilege, experience, and culture is relieved of complexity with, if not responsibility for, racist ideology and structural inequalities” (p. 152).

#### MY ANALYSIS OF *FREEDOM WRITERS*

As part of the pedagogical project I plan to undertake with the preservice teachers, I will ask that the students analyze the film *Freedom Writers*, using techniques similar to those of Henry Giroux (1997, 2002) which I discussed in a previous section. In this section, I will attempt to analyze *Freedom Writers* using the arguments of Giroux (1993, 1997, 2002) through articulating some of his highlighted scenes from *Dangerous Minds* with scenes from *Freedom Writers*. In other words, I will read *Freedom Writers* through Giroux’s analysis of *Dangerous Minds*.

After a series of violent images taken from the news footage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the film *Freedom Writers* introduces the viewers to the main character, Erin Gruwell.

The screenplay details the visual attack depicted on film:

TITLE / CREDIT SEQUENCE: (Song option; “The Revolution will not be Televised”)

DOCUMENTARY FOOTAGE: THE WAR IN FULL FORCE IN THE STREETS. 9 RIOT SCENES. DESTRUCTION AND CHAOS IN THE CITY STREETS. PEOPLE ATTACKING OR UNDER ATTACK. AN OVERTURNED CAR, TORCHED. A BUILDING’S FLAMES ROLLING THROUGH ITS ROOF.

We intercut news footage of the Rodney King Riots, headlines, on-camera reporting, & MTV footage to set our period and location. In this montage, we highlight:

VOICE OVER STATISTICS

38 Dead...More than 1200 injured...3600 structural fires...3 Firefighters have been shot by Snipers resulting in police escort for Firefighters...

SUPER; 128 DEATHS in the summer following the Rodney King Riots...HEADLINE; “Gang Violence At An All Time High.”

ALSO INTERCUT: MTV dubs Long Beach; “The Gansta Rap Capital of the world”...Images of Gansta life, fashion, culture...Rise of gangs amongst African American, Latino and Asian communities... (LaGravenese, 2007)

The film opens with scenes similar to *Dangerous Minds*. Like *Dangerous Minds*, these scenes from *Freedom Writers* situate the viewer in what Giroux (2002) describes as “a site of pathology, moral decay, and delinquency” (pp. 148-149). In addition, he describes the power of these images as “associating black and Hispanic kids with the culture of criminality and danger” (p.150). In the first minutes of *Freedom Writers*, the viewer is reminded of the violence and chaos stereotypically associated with inner-city life. Both the visual and audio aspects of the film perpetuate this message of depravity.



Together *Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds* are, according to Giroux (1997), “framed by racial iconography and a musical score that construct minority students as both the objects of fear and subjects in need of discipline and control, the audience is prepared for someone to take charge” (p. 113). The voice over in the title sequence outlines violent “others” as “African American, Latino and Asian”. The viewer is also told of the prominence of gangsta rap in Los Angeles. Giroux suggests “[...]the popularity of gangsta rap has served to reinforce the right-wing assumption that equates black culture with crime and violence” (p. 113). These small, but important, details situate the viewer in the racial tension and violence of Los Angeles, recalling preconceptions and past knowledge of stereotypes.

The reality of the film is that the events did happen in Los Angeles, the underlying message sent to the audience by situating the school within the violence of the city has been perpetuated in other films. This representational set-up, as Giroux (1993b) notes, allows for the “mythology” of the city to pervade the opening of the film:

Los Angeles seems to exemplify the changing nature of the metropolitan urban terrain and the cultural politics that appear to besiege it. The hybridized cultural landscape of Los Angeles has been mythologized in Dennis Hopper’s depiction of gang life in *Colors*, rendered as a borderland where cyborgs and humans rewrite the meaning of identity and difference in Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* and brilliantly taken up through complex relations that constitute the coming of age experiences of mostly black young men in a neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles in John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*. In all of these films, Los Angeles is portrayed against a gritty reality in which cultural differences produce a borderland where an apocalyptic vision of the future is played out amid growing forms of daily violence, resistance, fear, and struggle. (p. 105)

Based on the argument made by Giroux (1997, 2002), I believe these similarities in the opening sequences and settings of the films *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* help situate the culture of violence and poverty surrounding these urban schools. This situating is

necessary in order to advocate for a more acceptable behavior. The viewer is presented with a dangerous community, setting up the necessity for someone to come and civilize the savage behavior. The white female teachers in the films *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* then become the saviors representing what Giroux (2002) describes as the “norm for authority, orderliness, rationality, and control” (p. 150). Giroux (1993a) argues that the audience is encouraged to align with the authority figure of the “teacher” in such cases (p. 41).

In *Dangerous Minds*, LouAnne Johnson is our savior, while Erin Gruwell plays the role in *Freedom Writers*. Giroux (2002) describes LouAnne as “a good-hearted ingénue thrust into the classroom of ‘at-risk’ kids like a lamb led to the slaughter” (p. 149). Similarly, this description is more than adequate to describe Erin Gruwell. *Freedom Writers* attempts to present Erin as a teacher against the system rising up to encourage the students with introspection and the questioning of authority.

While LouAnne dresses in what Giroux (2002) describes as “dowdy tweeds and white lace,” a smiling, pearl clad Erin dons her best suit and designer briefcase for her first meeting at the school (p.149). LouAnne and Erin both enter the schools with a certain idealism and naiveté. Erin proclaims that she feels Wilson High School is where she is needed. Her idealism is evident during the scene depicting her first interactions with Margaret Campbell, the veteran teacher and head of the English department:

MARGARET: It’s too bad you weren’t here even two years ago. We always had one of the highest scholastic records in the district. But since voluntary integration was “suggested,” we’ve lost over 75 percent of our...strongest students.

ERIN: Well, actually, I chose Wilson because of the integration program. I think what’s happening here is really exciting. Don’t you? [*Erin recalls with awe*] My father was involved in the Civil Rights Movement and when he’d

tell me about the marches and the protests and...just knowing the effect they had, I'd always thought...Oh God, I have to do something like that.

MARGARET: Your father was a civil rights activist living in a gated community?

ERIN: No. My parents divorced when I was little. I lived with my mother... [refocuses subject] But I remember when I was watching the LA Riots on TV, I was thinking of going to law school at the time and I thought, God, by the time you're defending a kid in a courtroom, the battle's already lost. The real fighting should happen here, in the classroom.

*Margaret just looks at her feet. Erin's blatant optimism needs a moment to be believed. Erin sips her coffee uncomfortably.*

MARGARET: Well, that's a very...well thought out...phrase. Sounds like something a politician would say. Of course, you know how useless they are in education.

ERIN: I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound like... "let's make a difference!"

MARGARET: But that is what you mean?

ERIN: Well...yes. (LaGravenese, 2007)

In addition to situating herself as an idealistic novice, Erin has also reaffirmed the notions of media representations as meaning. Her reality of Los Angeles has been defined by the images she witnessed during the LA Riots.

After meeting her students for the first time in *Dangerous Minds*, LouAnne Johnson calls the students "rejects from hell." Her students are portrayed as disruptive and according to Giroux are represented as "intellectually inferior, hostile, and childish" (p. 150). Using the culture of drugs and music, LouAnne brings in the Bob Dylan song "Mr. Tambourine Man" and suggests to the students that the song centers on drug dealing. The lyrics of the song serve as a springboard into a lesson on poetry and symbolism. The students show interest in her lesson and she capitalizes on her success by next teaching the poetry of Dylan Thomas. This lesson is LouAnne's attempt at connecting to her students. However, Giroux reasons

that LouAnne denies the culture of her students and uses her own cultural artifact to teach a lesson. She falsely connects the music to her students' culture using the stereotype of violence and drugs. Giroux asserts that "rather than excavating the traditions, themes, and experiences that make up her students' lives in order to construct her curriculum, she simply avoids their voices altogether in shaping the context of what she teaches" (p. 153). Like LouAnne, Erin Gruwell fails to give consideration to the culture of her students and is quickly forced to reconsider her lesson in a scene where she attempts to use a song she associates with their culture:

Tupac Shakur's *Keep Your Head Up* begins to play in the background.

ERIN: I have this idea...We're going to be covering poetry. Who here likes Tupac Shakur?

JAMAL: (corrects pronunciation) Tu – pac

ERIN: Tu-pac. Raise your hands. (only a few students respond) Really? I thought there'd be more fans. I have the lyrics to this song printed out. I want you to listen to this phrase I have up on the board. This is an example of an internal rhyme. What he does is very sophisticated and cool actually.

ANDRE: (interrupts Erin and begins quoting the song) Man child in the promised land couldn't afford many heroes Moms was the only one there my pops was a no-show

(others begin to take over)

MARCUS: And ohh – I guess ya didn't know that I would grow up to be so strong lookin kinda pale, was it the ale oh pops was wrong.

JAMAL: Where was the money that you said, you would send me talked on the phone and you sounded so friendly...

ANDRE: Ask about school and my welfare but it's clear, you ain't sincere hey who the hell cares. (looks at Erin curiously) You think we don't know Tupac?

MARCUS: White girl gonna teach us about rap? Nah. Nah...

ERIN: No, no that's not it. I'd like to...

EVA: Ha, you have no idea what you're doing up there, do you? You ever been a teacher before? (LaGravenese, 2007)

Erin has been taught the lesson during this session. She attempted to bring the culture to those to whom it belonged. Like Giroux (2002) observed from LouAnne's lesson with Bob Dylan, now Erin "has no understanding of the social and historical limits that shape their [the students'] sense of agency on a daily basis" (p. 152). Furthering his argument, he describes LouAnne's lesson as "nothing less than an act of cultural ignorance and bad pedagogy" (p. 153). The same sentiment could be said of Erin. However similar, Erin did try to connect with the culture of her students, but her lack of understanding only perpetuated her failure.

Armored with her privilege, and ignorance of that privilege, Erin confronts her students about why she isn't getting the respect she thinks she deserves:

ERIN: You...you don't feel respected? Is that what you said Eva? Well, maybe you're not. But to get respect you have to give it.

ANDRE: Bullshit

ERIN: What?

ANDRE: Why do I have to give respect to you? Because you're a teacher? I don't know you! How do I know you're not a liar standing up there? How do I know you're not a bad person standing up there? I'm not going to just give away my respect to because you're called a teacher.

EVA: White people always wanting their respect. Like they deserve it for free.

ERIN: I'm a teacher. It doesn't matter what color I am. (LaGravenese, 2007)

In this scene Erin has denied the students the authority of owning their race and their respect and she has shown her ignorance and acceptance of colorblindness. As Giroux (1993a) discusses, the breakdown of this mode of thinking is necessary in order to break through the dominance of "whiteness" and preconceptions of race in a world dominated by "a politics of

cultural difference predicated on broader conceptions of race and identity” (p. 101). In Giroux’s (1997) analysis of *Dangerous Minds* he discusses a similar scene involving LouAnne’s teaching and the Dylan song. I discussed this scene in a previous section noting the notion of “whiteness” as central to the scene.

Giroux insists that *Dangerous Minds* and similar films “can be used educationally to critically deconstruct both racial othering and “whiteness” as part of a broader discourse on racial justice” (pp.125-126). I believe that these similar scenes show the need for this type of analysis. It is important to note, however, that unlike *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers* does make some positive contributions to the concepts of social justice in education.

In the film *Freedom Writers*, Erin constructs a forum she calls the *Line Game* where her students begin to share information about themselves in a non-threatening manner. The lesson begins with a line of tape placed down the center of the classroom. Erin instructs the students to listen to a series of questions. If the question applies to them, then they should step up to the line. The lesson begins with the assumption that the students will all find similarities within each other’s lives. While her intentions are to build a sense of community and belonging for the students, her strategy of sameness and neutrality poses a threat to the individual culture of the students; however, this activity introduces the journal assignment to the students, an assignment that allows them to bring their context to the classroom:

ERIN: How many of you have seen *Boyz ‘N the Hood*?

[Everybody moves to the line]

ERIN: Ok...back away...next question... How many of you have a special cutie or sweetheart?

[Some get on. Mostly they laugh.]

ERIN: Ok, ok...Next question: How many of you live in the projects?

[The students who live in the projects get on the line.]

ERIN: How many of you expect to make it to graduation?

[No one moves to the line.]

ERIN: Ok, How many of you know someone – a friend, a relative – who was or is in jail or juvenile hall?

[Most of the kids step up to the line.]

SINDY: Does a refugee camp count?

ERIN: You decide. How many of you know someone in a gang?

[Ninety percent of the students step up to the line.]

ERIN: How many of you are in a gang?

[No one moves and they look distrustfully at Erin.]

ERIN: That was a stupid question, wasn't it? You're not allowed gang affiliations in school. I apologize for asking. My badness... Go to the line if you've buried a friend to gang violence.

[Ninety percent of the students step up to the line.]

ERIN: Stay on the line if you've buried more than one friend.

[A few get off, but most stay on.]

ERIN: Three... [some leave, most stay] four or more...[some leave, many stay and exchange looks] (LaGravenese, 2007)

As each question “deepens” into the depravity of the students’ lives, the film shows the audience more instances of students’ from different races “connecting” through sameness. Erin’s line of questioning continues and covers a full range of stereotypical ghetto life from violence, to drugs, and poverty. The lack of focus on any of the positive qualities the students may experience within their society is smothered by the oppressive whiteness of Erin and her notions of race and class. However, Erin uses this activity to introduce the

journal assignment that becomes the basis for *Freedom Writers*, a redemptive aspect because of the attention to personal narrative, storytelling, and the individual social context of the students' experiences:

ERIN: Everyone has their own story, and it's important to tell your own story...even to yourself. So what we're going to do is...we are going to write everyday in these journals. You can write about whatever you want...the past, the present, the future. You can write it like a diary, or you can write poems, songs...Any good thing, bad thing, ANY thing, but you have to write every day. Keep a pen nearby, whenever you feel inspiration. They won't be graded. How can I give you an A or B for writing the truth? Right? And I will not read them unless you give me permission. I'll have to check to see that you've made an entry, but I'll do this...just skim to see you wrote that day. (LaGravenese, 2007)

Erin allows the students the space to tell their own stories. This movement toward cultural awareness is a positive step away from what Giroux (2002) condemns in *Dangerous Minds*. Giroux (2002) describes LouAnne's lessons noting, "rather than excavating the traditions, themes, and experiences that make up her students' lives in order to construct her curriculum, she [LouAnne Johnson] simply avoids their voices altogether in shaping the context of what she teaches" (p. 153). The journal assignment is a turning point for *Freedom Writers*. While the film does use aspects of racism and stereotypes in its depiction of Erin Gruwell and her class, it is important to note that the stories of the students are a necessary and redemptive aspect of the film. My hope is that the preservice teachers participating in the project note the aspects of the film, or similar scenes, in their analysis.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have suggested the use of a project designed to increase the critical reflective thinking of preservice teachers in relation to representations of race and teachers in school films. Multiple educators have written on the use of school film as a pedagogical text (e.g., Brunner, 1994; Freedman, 1999; Giroux, 1993a; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Paul, 2001; Robertson, 1995). I am adding to the discipline by suggesting the use of the film *Freedom Writers* as a pedagogical text for analysis. *Freedom Writers* is a recent school film that demonstrates the connection of race, culture, and pedagogy within the classroom.

During the project I have designed, the preservice teachers write reflective essays examining the concept of “representation” and race. Additionally, I required the preservice teachers to analyze selected readings by Stuart Hall (1980) and Henry Giroux (1997), view films such as *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, and then review and analyze the users’ comments on Internet Movie Database. The analysis of the comments should be completed using Hall’s theory of reading, which attributes three kinds of readings: “preferred,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” readings. My goal with this project is to engage preservice teachers in critical discussions of race and representation within the classroom. Ultimately, I hope to encourage preservice teachers to think critically about the popular culture messages and representations and how these messages affect their role in the classroom.

Necessary on the part of the preservice teacher is the ability to write critically reflective essays about what they are experiencing and understanding, and the ability to engage in a public discourse within the teacher education classroom concerning the representations and readings. This allows the preservice teachers to engage in scholarly discourse while reflecting on their own preconceived notions of schooling.

I plan to further the preservice teacher project by asking the students to review Henry Giroux's analysis of the film *Dangerous Minds*. In a teacher education setting, I believe that a close reading of popular culture texts can benefit preservice teachers with their understanding of race and schooling. Like Giroux's (1997) discussion of *Dangerous Minds*, preservice teachers can analyze scenes to find deeper meanings, more relevant to teaching, in the text.

Finally, I attempted to analyze *Freedom Writers* using the arguments of Giroux (1997, 2002) and articulated some of his highlighted scenes from *Dangerous Minds* with scenes from *Freedom Writers*. In other words, I read *Freedom Writers* through Giroux's analysis of *Dangerous Minds* in the fashion I expect from the preservice teachers at the culmination of the project.

The issue of race and schooling are the topic of discussion for this paper and project; however, I want to acknowledge the importance gender plays in an analysis of these two films. It is my intention to examine the powerful issue of gender in a subsequent project. This paper can be used as the basis for multiple investigations into the representations present in school films.

My overall intent with the design of this project has been to engage preservice teachers in an examination of race and schooling through the use of school film. I believe

that this project articulates between popular culture texts, educational theory and philosophy, and pedagogy and may allow for preservice teachers to have a better understanding of social justice.

It is past time for a necessary transformation in teacher education programs. Courses consisting of textbook methodology and praxis have the potential for leaving new teachers void of concepts of social justice, a necessary part of an equitable curriculum. According to Oakes & Lipton (2007), “Traditional teacher education programs must recognize the need for preparing a workforce of culturally responsive teachers with the ability to recognize and support diversity and various cultural perspectives and practices” (p. 114). I believe that the project I have designed (the analysis of the school film *Freedom Writers*, race, and representation) supports a social justice curriculum in teacher education.

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